DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 934 TM 810 049

AUTHOR Stiggins, Richard J.
TITLE A Parent's Guide to Testing in the Schools.
INSTITUTION Nero and Associates, Inc., Portland, Oreg.; Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Sep 80
NOTE 19p.; For related documents, see TM 810 047-048 and TM 810 050.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Testing; Elementary Secondary Education; *Parent Education; *Parent Student Relationship; *Test Interpretation

ABSTRACT

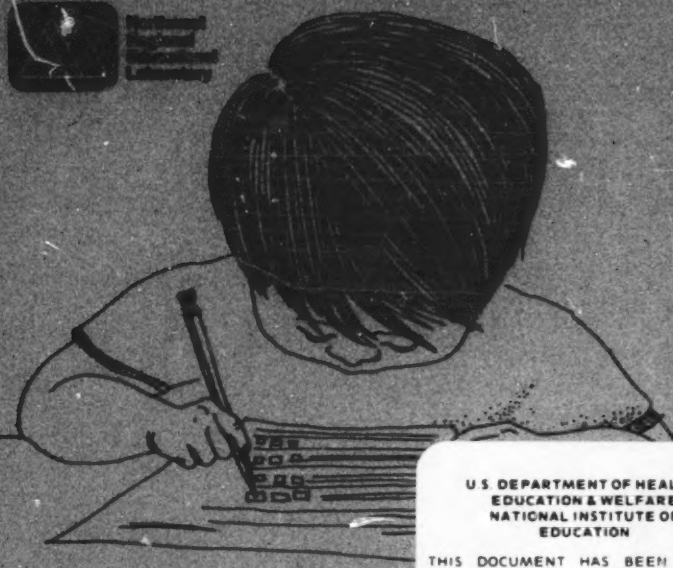
This booklet is written in non-technical language and focuses on educational testing issues currently of interest to parents. Some of the questions parents commonly ask about tests are identified and answered. Questions include: (1) What are tests and why are they used?; (2) How are they used?; (3) How many different kinds of tests are there?; (4) What do different test scores mean?; (5) Are tests really sensitive to differences in students' cultural backgrounds?; (6) How can you tell if a test is a good test?; (7) Can parents help their children prepare for tests?; (8) What can parents do to help the child who is extremely nervous about tests?; (9) Can parents help their children deal with test scores?; and (10) What questions and issues should I raise with my child's teacher and principal regarding tests? A short bibliography of suggested readings for parents is included. (Author/RI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED196034

NOV 81
RECEIVED
IC/TM

a parent's guide to testing in the schools



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

a parent's guide to testing in the schools

Richard J. Stiggins

National Institute of Education,
U.S. Education Department,
Contract No. 400-79-0059

Coordinated by:
Nero and Associates, Inc.
520 S.W. Sixth Avenue, Suite 820
Portland, OR 97204
Susan W. Rath, Project Director

Materials developed by:
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Assessment and Measurement Program
710 S.W. Second Avenue
Portland, OR 97204

September 1980

This booklet was prepared by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a private nonprofit corporation under a subcontract with Nero and Associates, Inc., Portland, Oregon. The work contained herein has been developed under a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Education Department, pursuant to Contract No. 400-79-0059/SB0408(a)-79-C-197. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of the National Institute of Education, and no official endorsement by the Institute should be inferred. Mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply endorsement by the U. S. Government.

These materials are in the public domain and may be reproduced without permission. The following acknowledgment is requested on materials which are reproduced: Developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.

This booklet is intended to be used in conjunction with workshops and seminars conducted by measurement specialists using the training methods described in Training Citizen Groups on Educational Testing Issues: A Trainer's Manual, developed under this same contract.

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to Harriett Taylor and the Portland Public Schools Title I Parent Advisory Board for their key role in the preparation of this booklet. Thanks also to the many workshop participants, sponsors and presenters who provided helpful comments on it and Carol DeWitte who was responsible for its production.

Designed and Illustrated by Carol Johnson and Warren Schlegel

Test scores help teachers, guidance counselors and school administrators make some very important decisions about students—from the earliest grades through high school and college. For this reason, you as a parent need to be concerned about testing and you need to know some of the basics of testing in the schools, so you can (1) ask questions about tests and testing of your child's teacher and (2) understand the decisions teachers, counselors and administrators are making about your child's school life. In this booklet, we have tried to cover some of the basics by identifying and answering some questions parents commonly ask about tests.

What are tests and why are they used?

Tests are teaching tools that help the teacher to know how much students have learned, what they have not learned and what to teach next. Teachers use many different types of tests, some paper-and-pencil tests, some less formal observations. For instance, teachers are trained to watch students and see signs of problems or instances of special skills. But it would be virtually impossible for a teacher to mentally keep track of the progress of every student. Tests help teachers measure and keep track of student growth, thus making it easier to plan group and individual instruction.

Tests also help school administrators plan overall educational programs that will benefit all students in a given school, district or state. Using test information on student growth, administrators can plan to provide additional educational resources to specific groups of students who appear to need more help.

How are tests used?

Tests can provide a wide range of valuable kinds of information to help educators make the right decisions about your child's education. For example, tests can

* Help teachers spot students' strengths and weaknesses.

* Help teachers and administrators place students in a course or class with other students who have the same needs.

* Help educators verify that students have mastered school requirements.

* Help select students for advanced or remedial training.

* Help teachers improve their instruction.

* Help educators determine whether or not to continue a particular course.

* Help boards of education make the best use of educational tax dollars.

* Help educational researchers study and improve teaching.

As your child goes through elementary school, junior high school, high school and perhaps on to college, you will see tests used in all these ways to guide his or her progress. Knowing what information tests can provide and the kinds of decisions that can be made on the basis of test results will give you a better understanding of why your child is being tested.

How many different kinds of tests are there?

There are many different types of tests. When we describe the different types, we can think in terms of what the test measures, who develops the test, and how it is used. Consider first what the test measures:

1. Some tests measure ability to learn; others measure the amount of learning that has taken place.

Tests that measure ability to do school work are called aptitude tests. Various aptitude tests measure ability to do mathematics, to use language, to solve problems, or to perform any of a number of other academic tasks. Ability to do school work is influenced by a wide variety of things, such as family, culture (language, home environment, etc.), health, and emotional factors.

Tests that measure the knowledge and skills the student actually has learned are called achievement tests. Actual achievement is influenced not only by the student's ability to learn, but also by the quality of teaching and the child's physical and emotional health, as well as attitude toward school and learning.

2. Teachers prepare some tests for day-to-day classroom use; others are prepared by test publishers.

Teachers can create their own tests to measure the learning that has resulted from recent classroom instruction. These tests indicate what each student has or has not

learned. These are achievement tests. Teachers are not trained to prepare their own aptitude tests. Aptitude tests require a high level of technical sophistication to develop, as well as a great deal of time and money.

An alternative to the teacher-made test is the published test. Test publishers consult with teachers all over the country to find out what they are teaching so they can develop tests that cover the common topics. This kind of test offers a major advantage in that a student's achievement, for example in reading, can be compared with the reading skill of other students in the same age group across the country.

Teacher-made tests are used on a day-to-day basis in the classroom, while published tests may only be used once or twice a year. The most important test in your child's educational growth is the teacher's test. However, the published tests are often used by building and district administrators to judge overall student development. Published tests are also used to tell parents in a general way how their child is doing in relation to other students in subjects like reading and math. So they are important also.

3. Some tests determine a student's mastery of a given body of knowledge; others are designed to show how well each student performs in comparison to other students.

With a mastery test, the student's performance is compared to a standard of acceptable achievement. The student either has or has not learned the required

materials. How other students perform is not important in this case.

With a comparison test, the goal is to show how well each student has done compared to other students. This kind of test is intended to highlight differences in the amount learned by different students.

Tests that teachers develop and use on a day-to-day basis generally have standards of acceptable performance teachers use to judge student progress. Nationally published tests, on the other hand, are often designed to compare students with one another, so judgments can be made regarding which students or groups of students need more help.

Again, in terms of day-to-day learning, the teacher's tests and judgments in the classroom are most crucial. But published tests also have a role to play.

What do different test scores mean?

There are several kinds of test scores and each has its own meaning. Teachers usually score their own tests by counting the number of questions the student answered correctly out of the total number of questions on the test. Often teachers convert this score to a percent correct. For example, the student who answered 40

out of 50 questions correctly would receive a score of 80%. Then teachers decide on a passing score based on their experience and knowledge of the class.

With published tests, scores are more technical, but are not any more difficult to understand. Remember that published tests often (but not always) compare each student's performance with the performance of other students. The scores most often used to show that comparison to teachers, parents, guidance counselors and other test users are grade equivalent scores and percentile scores.

The grade equivalent score shows the performance of the student compared to the average or typical performance of a large group of students at a given grade level. For example, a fifth grader might receive a grade equivalent score of 7.2 on a math test. That means that the student received a score about equal to that of the average seventh grader in the second month of the school year. This does not mean necessarily that the fifth grader is capable of doing seventh grade work. This is a common misunderstanding. Remember that a score of 7.2 simply means that on this test, the student answered about as many items correctly as the average seventh grader probably would answer correctly early in the school year.

The percentile score shows the student's level of performance in relation to a large group of students (who took the test under the same conditions) in terms of the percentage of that group who scored below that student. For example, if a student receives a percentile score of 68, it means that student achieved a score higher that 68% of the large group.

These are just a few of many kinds of test scores. If you happen to come across one that you don't understand, be sure to ask the teacher or administrator to explain it. It is always important for you as a parent to understand the meaning of test scores used to plan your child's education.

Are tests really sensitive to differences in students' cultural backgrounds?

The answer depends on who develops the test. A test developed by a person or persons who are aware of the fact that children from different cultures have different experiences will probably reflect that awareness in test content and questions. Ten years ago, test publishers were not as conscious of this issue as they are today. Today test publishers give very careful attention to the fact that a great number of cultures are represented in our schools and they try to develop tests accordingly. Therefore, recently published tests are more likely to be adequate in terms of cultural sensitivity than tests published ten years ago or more. Teachers are generally aware of the need to consider cultural differences among their students, too. So teacher-made tests are likely to take cultural differences into account.

The only way to decide whether a test is biased or fair in relation to given culture is to examine that test, question by question, in light of the cultures of the students who are to take the test. There are no overall rules that apply to all tests and/or all cultures. Such test review, therefore, frequently falls to a group of persons selected for their combined skills: teachers, counselors, parents, testing specialists, and professional test developers. Their combined opinions lead to sound judgment regarding a test's cultural sensitivity. But, if you see a test that you do not feel is fair in terms of your child's culture and experience, you should discuss it with your child's teacher.

How can you tell if a test is a good test?

A good achievement test accurately and adequately covers what has been taught. If the goal of testing is to determine what the student has or has not learned, it makes no sense to use a test whose questions do not cover what is taught in class. This is seldom a problem with teacher-made tests, since teachers know precisely what skills or knowledge they have covered. It can be a problem with published tests, however, because published tests are designed to cover a very broad general curriculum. Therefore, published tests must be reviewed carefully by teachers and administrators before they are purchased to be sure they cover what is taught in the local classroom.

Good tests are also tests that students, teachers and parents can depend

on to be consistent. That is, the score a student receives on a test today should be close to the score that student would get on that same test if she or he took it tomorrow, assuming no new learning has taken place. The score should also remain the same no matter who scores the test. Further, two tests intended to cover the same material should result in the same score for any particular student. A test that fails to meet any of these conditions for dependability cannot provide a true picture of a student's level of development.

Can parents help their children prepare for tests?

They certainly can. But here again, we must separate day-to-day classroom tests from the once-a-year standardized test. The key to success on a day-to-day basis is good study habits. Parents can help by providing a good study environment and encouragement. The key to success on the once-a-year test is also good study habits over the long term, but in addition, the student must be well rested and alert on test day. Parents should do all they can to see that a child gets a good night's sleep and eats properly prior to the test. Parents should also be aware that family conflicts can frequently disturb a child enough to affect how the child does on the

test. Attitude and motivation are critical too. Parents can help their children succeed on tests by really taking the tests seriously and encouraging their child to do the same. They can also help by encouraging their children to try to do their best, even though very few people get a perfect score, particularly on published tests.

What can parents do to help the child who is extremely nervous about tests?

This can be a problem. Some children seem unable to perform well on tests, particularly the "big" tests, because of nervousness. Here are a few suggestions for coping with this problem:

* Be sure the child understands what the test means. Parents and teachers can help the child keep the test in perspective. A test is only one form of evaluation the teacher uses. Having the teacher explain how the test score is to be used is reassuring to some students. Teachers are generally very sensitive to the anxiety problem and can help you deal with it.

* See if you can get the child to talk about his or her nervousness. Is it the result of something the teacher has said? Something other students said? The child's perceptions of your expectations? Sometimes a talk with your child can help uncover the reason for the extreme nervousness.

Explore your own attitudes about tests. What are your expectations about your child's performance? How have you communicated them? Are you sensitive to the pressures your child faces in competing with and being compared to other students? Have you discussed the problem with your child's teacher? Remember, if you demand perfect test scores, there is a good chance you and your child will both be disappointed.

Generally, fear of tests does not arise by itself. It results from other factors in the school or home environment. Of course, a little nervousness at test time can be good because it causes the student to be alert. But a great deal of fear has a bad effect and deserves some involvement and action from parents.

Can parents help their children deal with test scores?

Yes, you can. But the kind of help parents can give depends on the level of the test score. If the scores are very

high, obviously parents can be encouraging. But parents also need to help students keep in mind the fact that test scores are only one measure of learning. Students may need to be reminded to be sensitive to the feelings of others who didn't score as high.

If the scores are average, parents can still be encouraging as they discuss with the child (and perhaps the teacher too) what the scores mean. Perhaps the student is already working up to his or her potential; if so, some positive encouragement is in order. If not, parent and child can discuss ways in which the student can improve. But remember: sometimes improvement will be more difficult on the once-a-year published test than on the teacher's classroom tests. This is true because a teacher's tests tend to cover just what is presented in class, while a nationally published test may cover different material than is actually presented in class.

If the test scores are extremely low, check with your child's teacher and principal regarding the student's aptitude (ability) test scores. If aptitude scores are high and achievement scores are low, the child may have some form of a learning disability, or vision or hearing problem. School officials can often give you information on this issue. If no disabilities are present, attitude or motivation may be the problem. This can often be uncovered by talking with the child and the teacher; feel free to ask the teacher to arrange a conference where you, your child and the teacher can talk.

What questions and issues should I raise with my child's teacher and principal regarding tests?

Here are a few questions that may concern you as a parent:

* What is the teacher's attitude about testing? What is the principal's attitude?

Tests can be regarded as one of a variety of ways used by educators to measure student growth and to help students develop.

* To what extent do educators in your district rely on teacher-made versus published tests?

Remember, teacher-made tests are designed to cover the topics actually presented in class. They are more useful for day-to-day in-class planning. Published tests should not be playing such a key role in in-class planning unless they have been selected to match actual in-class instruction.

* How do educators use tests to help with decisions about your child's education?

The list can include determining the needs of individual students, selecting students for special programs, educational and vocational guidance and counseling, and evaluating instruction. Tests can and should play a role in all of these.

* How does the teacher respond to a student's test scores?

This should depend on the score. High scores deserve one response, low scores another (see pp. 12 & 13). Sensitivity to the effect of the score on the child's motivation to learn and self concept should be most important. This is true for both parents and teachers.

Parents have a responsibility to their children and to teachers to understand and express views on testing in the schools. Don't be afraid to ask questions about aspects of testing you don't understand. You can help make testing a positive part of your child's education if you understand some of the basics of testing.

Further Reading

Herndon, Enid B. Your Child and Testing. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, May 1980.

National Education Association. Parents and Testing. Washington, D.C., 1979.

Ryan, Charlotte. The Testing Maze. Chicago, IL: The National PTA, 1979.